



## Preamble, Introduction and Epilogue to "China's Lost Decade"

Gregory B. Lee

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# **CHINA'S LOST DECADE**

**CULTURAL POLITICS AND POETICS**  
**1978-1990**

**IN PLACE OF HISTORY**

**Gregory B. Lee**

Tigre de Papier

*In memory of Paola Sandri*

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## **PREAMBLE**

The objective of this book is to discuss a moment in China's recent history from the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s that constituted the last period to date of a widespread intellectual and cultural engagement with the politics of the modern nation-state. This time can be seen as a long decade, but also historically as a "lost" decade. It is "lost" in the sense that the political engagement of intellectuals and makers of culture has been occulted by official history-telling; it is also "lost" in that its memory has been abandoned even by many who lived through it; "lost" also in the embarrassed silence of those who prefer to foreground the subsequent economic miracle of the 1990s that gave rise to today's more prosperous China; and "lost" as a time of opportunity for cultural and political change that ultimately did not happen.

As this period began China's revolutionary era was declared over, its achievements deemed nugatory, by the political coup, the toppling of the Gang of Four, which followed the demise of Premier Zhou Enlai and

Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976, and which ultimately led to Deng's hegemonic grip on power. And yet, the ideology and values that had dominated the life of China's political and intellectual elite for much of the twentieth century continued to exercise their influence. In the immediate post-Mao era, even those disabused with Communist ideology were still in thrall of its logic and mechanisms; embedded in the contestatory discourse and actions of the dissident intelligentsia was an ideal, utopian notion of communism. In other words, young dissident former Red Guards were disappointed and chagrined, and passionately so, by the betrayal of the ideals of egalitarianism, liberation and total revolution that had so convinced them at the start of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s, and even before that.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beyond Communist ideology, but also central to it, was the legacy of an intellectual revolutionary discourse that had its beginnings in the mid- to late nineteenth century burgeoning nationalist frustration with the regnant dynasty's impotence in the face of Western and Japanese military superiority. This patriotic, anti-imperialist discourse demanded that educated youth consecrate their ambitions and their abilities to serving China. 'China' was at first

understood as a post-traditional state defined and coalesced into a fictional oneness in reaction to the aggression of numerous foreign powers. But the proto-nationalist origins of this modern response were to be found in a centuries-long hostility to the "foreign", Qing dynasty ruling Manchu house, which paradoxically could not have ruled unless thoroughly integrated into, and supported by a centuries-old Chinese bureaucratic institutions and elite cultural universe.

After the First World War (1914-1918), the 1919 Versailles peace process from which the fledgling republic emerged badly treated -- and more like a vanquished power than the ally China in fact had been to Britain, France, the USA and Japan -- China's intellectual class adopted a logic common to numerous other Asian and African countries seeking sovereignty: a logic that dictated the attainment of independence and sovereignty by a mandatory and unavoidable emulation of the modernized nation-state model to which there was deemed to exist no alternative. While Europe's Asian and African colonies had been denied sovereignty by President Wilson's peace congress, the principle of national self-determination and the notion of the nation-state as the basic framework and *sine qua non* of modernity had been reaffirmed and consolidated by Woodrow Wilson's doctrine and the new Europe that was

founded upon it.

In China, the connection between Versailles and the path to be followed to the renewal of sovereignty was dramatically illustrated by the 4 May 1919 student demonstrators who protested against the outcome of the treaty talks by marching across Tiananmen Square. The protests evolved into renewed demands for Western-style scientific and political methods to be adopted. As such what became known as the 'May Fourth Movement' reiterated and restructured more intensely and vociferously demands and initiatives in favour of cultural and scientific changes that had, in essence, already been voiced.

But more than providing a new impulse to a process of Westernization that was paradoxically also supposed to liberate China from Western dominance, the 4 May Movement provided a model of romantic revolutionary fervour for urban elite youth to emulate. Indeed, the behaviour and ideological orientation of the 1960s Red Guards, and the post-Cultural Revolution intelligentsia they became, can be traced back to that model.

This culturalist view of China's twentieth-century does not seek to challenge the centrality of political economic questions in China's recent history, but rather foregrounds the fact that in the process of building and consolidating a nation so much depends on cultural and ideological construction that the

importance of, what Marx had termed, the "superstructure" of culture and other non-material institutions has been just as important as the economic base. In so saying, there is no intention here of defending Mao Zedong's and Mao's followers' attempts to make ideology and culture supreme. My desire is rather to illustrate the power of ideology to motivate China's intelligentsia and the historical importance of this culturalist perspective in its intellectual imaginary.

While this book has the serious objective of attempting to present the, at once, parallel yet intermeshed moments, evolutions, events, practices and objects of a period that runs from the late 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s, there is no pretence that this account is either exhaustive or comprehensive. This is simply, yet ambitiously, an attempt to "make sense" of a period of time in a "post-historical" world, or rather in a present moment marked by an abandonment of historicity as a public and intellectual priority.

In China, this non-historicity is pushed to the extreme of an almost total effacement of the pre-capitalist revolutionary past by the acrobatic strategies of China's authorities.

Henri Lefebvre in his 1970 *La Fin de l'histoire* (The end of history) wrote that history would "not simply be institutionalized but consolidated repressively." He

predicted: "the course of time will be fixed by decree and the past will be programmed."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately that 1970s vision of the future has already become our past and our present.

This book then has the intention not of being a 'history' but rather of temporarily standing in place of history. If it contributes to preparing the ground for the narration of history when eventually that history-telling becomes possible, of this moment I have named the Lost Decade, it will have achieved its purpose.

In other words, what is intended here is not a monumentalizing of the past, but a discerning of the possible, and thus of the future, through the optic of a historicized moment.

This book is planned to be the first part of a wider and deeper study of a period that started with Mao's demise and Deng Xiaoping's assumption of supreme power and which continues to this day. The book is based on several decades of acquaintance with, and study of, China's modern cultural history. It is founded in part on my lived experience of China in the 1980s during which time I studied and worked in Beijing, and travelled throughout China.

While this experience offers multiple insights and a useful immediacy in the apprehending of the China of the 1980s, it can also give rise to a tendency to

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<sup>1</sup> P. 209.

emphasize what was familiar to me, located in Beijing, at the expense of what was happening beyond the capital. Nevertheless, given the absence and the impossibility of having access to many of the means normally available to cultural historians, a partial experience is in the case of contemporary Chinese history better than none at all. While I am convinced of the enormous diversity of modern urban culture in 1980s China – not to mention pre-modern local forms – that fact remains that the centralized, cultural and political authority was based in Beijing, and contestation and opposition (despite a history of regional intellectual opposition) was, similarly, Beijing-focussed.

But this book is also grounded in a personal experience that reaches even further back than 1980s Beijing. It is impelled and tempered by an interest in, and a vision of, China acquired in a Chinese diasporic childhood, in half-understood snatches of conversation about events in China, in folk stories imbibed whilst sat on a grand-father's knees. Mao Zedong (pronounced and heard as Mao Jek-tung) and Chiang Kai-shek, were familiar to me long before I had mastered the names of contemporary local football heroes. Of those years spent living under the same roof with an expatriate old "Chinaman," more than the now only half-remembered Chinese fables, more than the frequent forays together to Chinatown

and its satellite communities that remain vivid and lush and almost tangible in my mind, what most left its trace was the old man's sustained and passionate interest for what was happening in China. For even after a half-century of continuous separation from his homeland, he remained doggedly attached to the land of his birth. The paternity of my determined and continued interest in the *res serica*, in things Chinese, belongs to him.



## INTRODUCTION

*By now history is nothing  
more than the thin thread of  
what is remembered  
stretched out over the ocean  
of what has been forgotten;  
but time moves on, and new  
eras will arise, eras the  
limited memory of the  
individual will be unable to  
grasp...*  
Kundera<sup>§</sup>

### THE BEGINNING OF THE 'LOST DECADE'

When was the "lost decade"? It surely spans all of the 1980s, but where are its limits?

The beginning of the post-Mao era saw the consolidation and maintenance of Deng Xiaoping's

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<sup>§</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (translated from the Czech [Žert, 1967] by Henry Heim), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, p. 244.

power through a staggered manoeuvring for political hegemony that commenced in earnest with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Yet Deng had already made several comebacks after having been labelled a rightist and "capitalist roader" during the Cultural Revolution retrospectively demarcated as the period between 1966 and 1976. Many of the measures that Deng instituted after 1977 had already been proposed by him at the tail end of the Cultural Revolution before Mao's demise. Notwithstanding, the year 1976 was as replete with politically crucial and symbolic events as the year 1989 would prove to be.

On 8 January 1976 China's Premier, Mao's right-hand man since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, passed away. Zhou Enlai, while no dissident nor democrat, had always seemed to be supportive of the intellectual, and what was more was habitually portrayed as the only man capable of tempering Mao's excesses. In hindsight, such an assessment is questionable, fails to acknowledge the collective responsibility of the regnant power constituted by the Communist Party's upper echelons, and also sustains the myth that Mao Zedong was solely responsible for the catastrophes and extensive abuses of power that took place after 1949.

This said, it cannot be denied that Zhou Enlai had tried to maintain some kind of role for less radically minded technocratic functionaries and that during the

period 1972-1975 when China started to "open up" he succeeded in bringing back into government non-radicals such as Deng Xiaoping. The popular perception of Zhou Enlai, his place in the urban elite's imaginary, his usefulness as a figurehead of moderation, led to mass mourning during the 1976 Qingming Festival on which day the dead are habitually remembered and honoured. In 1976, Qingming fell on 5 April. As the police removed wreaths that had been laid around the Martyrs' Monument in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, the mourners were transformed into demonstrators against the denial of popular grief, and the mourning then turned into a mass demand for a more humane and moderate manner of governance.

The demonstrators were brutally suppressed and denounced as counter-revolutionaries. The event became known as the Tiananmen Incident. Many were killed. There exist no statistics; no images of the repression are available. It was recounted that Mao was persuaded by his closest advisors, who would become known as the 'Gang of Four,' that this manifestation of respect for Zhou was in fact an incipient and dangerous counter-revolutionary movement. Deng Xiaoping was suspected of having fomented the incident and was dismissed from his functions.

To recount the 1976 Qingming events at Tiananmen

Square in this way almost inevitably and temptingly invites a comparison with the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre a dozen years later. The suppression in June 1989 would also be designated an "incident" by the authorities. In 1989, Deng Xiaoping, it is said, was advised that the students and their supporters presented a counter-revolutionary threat, and were intent on toppling both him and the Communist Party apparatus. But as we shall see throughout this account of the Lost Decade, and contrary to the clement view of Deng that is often presented in Western and Chinese accounts of the man and his action, Deng Xiaoping was capable of acting decisively and harshly with or without 'advice.' A scenario presenting the two Tiananmen "incidents", as two "neat" opening and closing scenes would be too facile and would tend to elide the major historical, political, diplomatic, economic and technological changes, that took place between 1976 and 1989; there were no satellite transmissions, and no CNN, indeed no external mass media presence at all at the first Tiananmen Incident.

Chairman Mao Zedong died on 9 September 1976, and on 6 October Mao's chosen successor Hua Guofeng 华国锋, emboldened by his advisors, arrested Mao's widow, Jiang Qing 江青, and three of Mao's courtiers: Wang Hongwen 王洪文, Yao Wen Yuan 姚文元, Zhang Chunqiao 张春桥. While this

spectacular coup produced the desired effect of demonstrating dramatically the end of the Cultural Revolution, it also re-entrenched the impression that the mistakes and crimes of a system could be blamed on a small, tight clique who had misled the people and the Party. Indeed, the objective of those in the higher echelons of the Party was to take control of the machine, and not to put in question its legitimacy. The "excesses" of the Cultural Revolution would be officially attributed to a small group who had manipulated Mao, and to a lesser extent to Mao himself. The responsibility of the Party would thus be limited, and its authority left unimpaired.

Deng Xiaoping who was the motor driving the reform faction of the Party, had been one of those labelled a "capitalist roader" during the Cultural Revolution. Such vocabulary at the time seemed to Western observers to be ludicrous hyperbole, only the experience of hindsight has shown how pertinent the judgement had been.



### Chairman Hua Guofeng

However, the fall of the Gang of Four in late 1976 did not bring about Deng's automatic return to power. Mao's successor, Hua Guofeng, was reticent to allow him back into office, and given the subsequent chain of events that led to Hua's own demotion and marginalization, Hua's caution was amply justified.

It had been intended that Hua rule in the manner of Mao, and so Hua attempted to maintain Mao's legend and the mythic spectacular shibboleths that had served so well in the past.

The visual representation of Hua was also constructed so as to mimic, and thus vicariously to perpetuate the aura of, the former Chairman. Thus in propaganda posters images of Hua were often juxtaposed with those of Mao, depicting a celebration of the continuity between the living and the dead.



This strategy, of adopting the spectacular style of governance of Mao Zedong, depended on a maintenance of populist Maoist iconography and representation of power, but also on continuing with Maoist policies and methods. Mao's basic ideology and its authority could thus be kept intact while the Gang of Four could be held responsible for having distorted Mao's intentions in the past.

Thus, the old Cultural Revolution means of impressing and persuading the people and, in particular, the workforce were extended into Hua's reign. A congress to celebrate the model agricultural commune of Dazhai was held in December 1976, and in April-May 1977, a similar congress took place to promote the model industrial collective, the Daqing oil field and refinery complex.<sup>2</sup>

Hua Guofeng also continued to adhere to the unpopular Mao-Gang of Four line that the Tiananmen

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<sup>2</sup> However, the mass campaign, first launched in 1964, exhorting the peasants to emulate the agricultural collective and the 'leftist' emblem that was Dazhai would be rapidly abandoned and replaced with a drive to stimulate individual peasants to produce surplus food for sale. The Daqing industrial model, however, is to this day exploited as a propaganda tool to exhort workers to greater efforts.

incident of 5 April 1976 had been a counter-revolutionary movement. In terms of policy, the maintenance of mechanisms and policies that had prevailed under Mao's regime was summed up in an editorial published in the major newspapers People's Daily, and Liberation Army Daily and in the monthly Party journal Red Flag: whatever decisions and whatever directives Mao had instituted would be firmly maintained. The policy, which became known as the "two whatevers" 两个凡是, soon came under attack from Deng's faction. In May, Deng let it be known that he considered this "whateverism" to be un-Marxist. The pressure on Hua, and the others who owed their careers to Mao, became irresistible and at the Third Plenum of the Tenth Central Committee (16-21 July 1977) of the Chinese Communist Party Deng was reinstated in his previously positions of power.

Over the summer months Deng pushed for the education system to be restored to its pre-Cultural Revolution normalcy and university entrance examinations resumed in October 1977, thus sounding the death-knell of the Maoist policy of positive discrimination in favour of workers, peasants and soldiers. Needless to say, the new policy was warmly received by the intellectual classes whom Deng needed to win over.

In the autumn, the State Science and Technology



Commission, and a national research institute, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, were established. Academics and intellectuals were thus reinstated into a position of relative privilege.

We therefore can trace the beginning of major institutional reforms to the end of 1977. Deng's return and these initial superstructural reforms mark the beginnings of our Lost Decade.

While the power struggle continued during 1978, the "return to normal," or rather to the status quo as it had been before the Cultural Revolution, gathered pace with the beginning of the reinstatement of toppled cadres, the overturning of political verdicts and the rehabilitation of many of those who had been declared "rightists." The major ideological inflection, essential to gaining the support of the more dissident elements of the ex-Red Guard generation, was the overturning of the verdict on the 5th April Tiananmen Incident. From a "counter-revolutionary" incident it was transformed into a "revolutionary movement." In November 1978, Hua Guofeng and his supporters were attacked by the Party elder Chen Yun and other Deng supporters, and "whateverism" was denounced.

In parallel, starting in August 1978, Democracy Wall was initiated when wall posters started to be stuck up on the Xidan section of the old wall surrounding the former imperial palace near Zhongnanhai 中南海. In November, the posting of politically oriented *dazibao*

大字报 intensified, and Deng Xiaoping voiced his support for the Democracy Wall movement. However, in terms both of textual production (inscribed on the Democracy Wall posters and published in the Democracy journals) and of dissident protest, to maintain that 1978-1979 was an unrehearsed and unprecedented moment of feverish activity following the sterility of the Cultural Revolution, would be to perpetuate an erroneous vision of the reality of the 1970s.

That "unofficial" political and cultural activities were suddenly allowed more freedom and even, for a time, encouraged, is undeniable. To bolster the position that ideas, words, and actions spontaneously erupted in a new atmosphere of post-Mao euphoria would be to subscribe to an official or quasi-official representation of facts and events.<sup>3</sup> The Li-Yi-Zhe

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<sup>3</sup> As Phil Williams noted in a post-1989 reflection on the dissent movement in the 1970s and 1980s, not only did there pervade a dominant impression reinforced by Western media representation of the 1989 events, that all political dissent and activity was concentrated in Beijing, what he calls "the capital mystique", but that what happened prior to officially fixed watershed dates (the death of Zhou, the death of Mao, the Fall of the Gang of Four) was occluded not only in popular media but also in the field of academic China studies. See Philip F. Williams, "Some Provincial Precursors of Popular Dissent Movements in Beijing," *China Information*, VI, 1 (1991) pp. 1-9.

wall poster affair in Guangzhou (Canton) in 1974 is a prime example of the order of dissent that would simply intensify during the period of the Democracy Wall. The Li-Yi-Zhe poster reproduced a manifesto entitled "On socialist democracy and legality." It was signed Li Yizhe – a composite name composed of the three names of the authors Li Zhangtian, Chen Yiyang and Huang Xizhe. The text criticized the campaign against Lin Biao 林彪, Mao's former second-in-command and chosen successor, who was denounced for conspiracy and the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, and who had died in a mysterious air crash. The text, in particular, questioned the obsessive condemnation of a single individual, rather than the system instituted by him, a system that continued to function, and which Li-Yi-zhe condemned as a "social-fascist dictatorship." The authors claimed that the early phase of the Cultural Revolution had been positive and revolutionary, in particular in terms of the freedom of movement, expression and of association it permitted and even encouraged. But, the authors maintained, all of these positive aspects had been halted in 1968. In conclusion, they demanded a constitution which would provide "social democracy and legality."

As Simon Leys (Pierre Ryckmans) noted in a 1977 appendix to his book *The Chairman's New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, whose title echoed

the words of Hans-Christian Andersen's fairy tale, had "Western observers paid any attention at the time to this historic document...instead of focussing on the permanent power-struggle waged between a handful of top bureaucrats, the Tiananmen demonstrations of April 1976 would not in that case have taken them so much by surprise."<sup>4</sup>

Demonstrations also took place as early as 20 March 1976 in Nanjing, and proclamations were issued and unofficial public commemoration ceremonies were held in the major provincial cities of Taiyuan, Wuchang, Wuhan and Hangzhou from mid-March 1976 onwards.<sup>5</sup> Just as the political posters and editorials of the 1978-1979 Peking Spring activists were inspired by the earlier, 1974, Li Yizhe manifesto, the literary texts that appeared in *Today* were far from being spontaneously written in the wake of the Fall of the Gang of Four, or the return to power of Deng.

Most of the so-called Misty Poets, including Bei Dao 北岛, Mang Ke 芒克, Gu Cheng 顾成, and the then less well-known Duo Duo 多多, had been writing 'unofficial' poetry inspired by a modernist aesthetic

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Appleyard and Patrick Goode (trans), London: Allison and Busby, 1977. ("But the emperor has no clothes!" shouted the child..." Hans-Christian Andersen, *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

<sup>5</sup> See Philip F. Williams, "Some Provincial Precursors of Popular Dissent Movements in Beijing."

and a revulsion for Mao-idolatric lyric products, since the early 1970s; many of Duo Duo's early poems are meticulously dated 1972. Mang Ke in his 1973 poem, that could be interpreted as dissenting from the dominant political line describing the sun as having 'sunk' (太阳落了), is at the very least a departure from the officially required lyric praise for Mao, the Party and the Motherland.

In fact, what made 1978-1979 seem to constitute the starting point of a literary renaissance was the sudden possibility, seized by writers and other producers of culture, of sharing previously hidden writings and artistic productions with a wider public, even if only in the form of samizdat publications and temporary displays.

But late 1978 was not only noteworthy for the appearance of samizdat publications. The month of December constituted, if not a democratic festival then at least, a sort of political holiday during which constraints were relaxed. This may have been connected to the major foreign policy event of the post-Mao era, for December saw not only the founding of democracy journals or *minkan* 民刊, but also the announcement of the imminent normalization of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the USA.

The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee brought Deng's supporters and protégés

Chen Yun, Wang Zhen and Hu Yaobang into the politburo. Little time was lost in declaring the class struggle no longer relevant. Now, the modernization of the economy was given priority. The tail-end of 1978, then, can also be seen as a key moment of change.

In the strictly political domain, however, it was during 1979 that Deng's power was consolidated within the Party, and the limits of the Party's tolerance of dissident political views were fixed and demonstrated with the arrest of numerous activists and the suppression of Democracy Wall.

By the end of 1979, Deng had become hegemonic, the Party's authority had been reaffirmed and the theory and practices of the Cultural Revolution were officially renounced and denounced. Pro-democratic dissident sentiment had been encouraged and then contained, and, by and large most intellectuals and writers with the exception of the unofficial, dissident ex-Red Guard cultural and intellectual activists, had been convinced of the sincerity of Deng's and the Party's new found benevolence towards them. To sum up, while during 1977 and 1978 the foundations of Deng's rise to supremacy had been laid, it was only during 1979 that the tone for the next ten years was set. The contradictions, the uncertainties, and the intermittent political campaigns in the socio-cultural domain would continue against a backdrop of

economic reforms until the economic and political discontent of 1988 and 1989 came to a head.

Let our Lost Decade start, then, with the optimism and activism that can be traced back to December 1978 and which waxed and then waned during the course of 1979.

## THE END OF THE DECADE

As for the end of the Lost Decade, 4 June 1989 would seem inevitably to be its terminus. Yet, from both political and economic perspectives the period following the post-Mao era, that was the Lost Decade, cannot be said to have commenced before 1992 with the determined implantation of Dengist consumerism which pervades China to this day. For it was in early 1992, that an ailing Deng found the strength to visit southern China and reinvigorate and relaunch his economic reforms with his now mythologized “southern tour” or *nanfang zhi xing* 南方之行.

But between 1989 and 1992, China, and especially Beijing, was gripped by an almost palpable moroseness. This short period was a sort of hiatus, a time of reckoning, a time of realization of what had happened, and what was to come. And what was to come was the great consumerist euphoria made possible not just by material incentives but by a sense of resignation and of powerlessness. The only means

of expression left to ordinary people -- in other words those who were politically powerless -- in the face of a system now clearly based on a willingness to employ military strength to maintain itself, was the accumulation of wealth, or economic empowerment. Naturally, to benefit from the new economic opportunities and from the questionable, although at the time unquestioned, pleasures of mass consumption it was necessary to be where wealth generation was favoured; in the cities and along China's coastline. With political participation now closed off to intellectuals and masses alike, the line of least resistance was to acquiesce in the Party-induced, but progressively self-generated, collective amnesia concerning the events of 1989. Indeed, eventually the whole 1970s-1980s pre-consumerist, politicized period would be bracketed off in the popular consciousness. Thus, official ideology once again would succeed in dominating the collective vision of everyday life, consigning the Lost Decade to a nebulous non-historical past.

And yet, politicization, even after the deception of the Cultural Revolution, and in part because of it, had been a characteristic of the Lost Decade. It was a decade marked also by intellectual, cultural and political negotiation between the Party on the one hand and civil forces represented by students, and public intellectuals, such as dissident journalists, on



the other.

The Lost Decade was also a period dominated by an ideology that was feared by hard-liners, espoused by many intellectuals, and encouraged by reformers within the Party. Their credo, which became hegemonic, was fed in large part by the old Cold War illusion that economic reforms leading to the installation of capitalism would inevitably and naturally lead to a process of political reform and 'democratization.' History since 1989, both in China and elsewhere, has proven this not to be so.<sup>6</sup>

However, the major issue was not economic change but the acquisition or retention of political power. And the dominant group within the Communist Party had no intention of relinquishing that power. In hindsight, it seems as if the dissident public intellectuals brashly chose to ignore the warning signs (the arrest and imprisonment of dissidents and the introduction of strict censorship) which accompanied the ground rules that were laid down by the regnant authority in 1979. Perhaps, some were convinced of the influence of the liberal faction in the Party, persuaded of Deng Xiaoping's loyalty to men he had put in place, and maybe some simply saw no alternative but to make

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<sup>6</sup> The participation in the global capitalist economy of former state-controlled socio-economies has not significantly democratized them, while democracy in those countries that 'won' the Cold War has suffered serious reverses.

their demands for democracy in a spirit of determined optimism. In any case, throughout the 1980s, intellectuals and cultural producers, with support from elements within the official structures, pushed against, tested and transgressed the limits that had been fixed in 1979.

## LANGUAGE OF THE DECADE

Beyond its relative political freedom, one further distinguishing feature of this long, Lost Decade was the linguistic liberty and reinvention that accompanied it. George Steiner in his 1959 essay the "The Hollow Miracle" – the miracle in question being the economic regeneration of post-War Germany – and again in "The Retreat from the Word" described the harm that had been done to the German language under the Nazis; the harm being the use that "political bestiality and falsehood can make of a language when the latter has...become ossified with clichés, unexamined definitions, and left-over words."

A decade later, in 1968, Steiner pointed to the renewed damage being done to the German language under the Socialist regime in East Germany.<sup>7</sup> In respect to the turning on its head of, the social

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<sup>7</sup> *George Steiner: A Reader*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, p. 208, p. 296.

practice of, language by a centralized, nationalized, political authority, what language in China underwent after 1949 resembled both these German moments.

The post-Mao period addressed in this book is a brief period of time, a short breathing space after the ossification of clichés that characterized official linguistic practice during the Cultural Revolution. During that hiatus, which, we should recall, was not a time of uninterrupted and widespread free expression, it was indeed possible to attenuate the ideological hegemony of political power over language. That moment, it is clear, ended in 1989.

The following years saw a return to a language of falsehood that once again turned the recounting of the past into a Communist-nationalist ideological fairy story, and once more turned reality on its head. Even now in post-Olympic China, with bookshops full of translated Western academic works and China's physical, if not its electronic, frontiers as open as they ever have been, history cannot be told, nor even attempted to be told in China, by Chinese, in Chinese.

But the "breathing space" was succeeded not only by a return to an official totalitarian-type grip on language. Something else has happened since 1989, a phenomenon shared with most of world society today.

Writing in 1961, George Steiner glimpsed what was to expand into a new and total instrumentalization of language in modern global society: "The language of

the mass media of advertisement in England and the United States, what passes for literacy in the average American high school or the style of present political debate are manifest proofs of a retreat from vitality and precision."<sup>8</sup> And almost fifty years after those words were written, the discourses of media, the education, and politics have become erected, or reduced, into a simplistic metalanguage of persuasive communication which, with great efficacy whether in America, Europe or China, masks reality and markets a simulacrum of contentment that globalized ultra-modernity is supposed to provide.

Indeed Steiner's words, that now seem to reverberate from a more heroic and less embarrassed moment of socio-cultural critique than the one in which we currently live, describe well the language of post-Deng China:

What save half-truths, gross simplifications or trivia can, in fact be communicated to that semi-literate mass audience which consumer society has summoned into the marketplace? Only in a diminished or corrupted language can most such communication be made effective.<sup>9</sup>

To which we might add with a half-century of

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<sup>8</sup> *George Steiner: A Reader*, p. 297.

<sup>9</sup> *George Steiner: A Reader*, p. 296.

hindsight: What else save half-truths, gross simplifications and trivia do the local agents of globalized governance wish to communicate to their mass audience?

## BEING THERE

There is one further dimension to this book's vision of the times it seeks to describe and explain. For the author of this book the temporal and intellectual boundaries of this Lost Decade were necessarily determined by a personal, lived experience of China during those years, years embraced by two particular milestones that left deep impressions – the first in 1979, the second in 1990. I first set foot in China on 30 August 1979. I had flown to Hong Kong the day of the assassination of the Queen of England's uncle Lord Mountbatten, news of which had been announced over the British Airways aircraft's sound system by a very moved and matronly chief flight attendant. After thirty-six hours, in the then still very British colony, spent purchasing consumer durables such as a cassette-radio player and an electric fan - commodities then rare in mainland China – together with another twenty British Council scholars I crossed the frontier on foot at Shenzhen, then a simple border town which gave no hint of the industrial twin-city to Hong Kong that it was to become. On the last day of August, after two sweltering days spent in the Canton-

Peking express (the journey then took 39 hours), I got off the train in the capital's main railway station. That was the beginning of my China decade, which began with my witnessing the last weeks of the Peking Spring and of Democracy Wall, a myriad of posters that both concretized and symbolized a moment of relatively free political expression that had been manipulated with a Machiavellian agility by the bridge-playing Deng Xiaoping. Symbolically, that decade ended for me in May 1990, when I returned to the scene of the debacle of the 1989 democracy movement. As an undergraduate at London's School of Oriental and African Studies my four years of somewhat privileged and elitist training had focused equally on modern and pre-modern Chinese studies. I had been one of only two students to specialize in poetry both "classical" and modern. Now, just as I arrived in Beijing, several of those pioneering modern writers had been released from their seclusion, exclusion and exile which had lasted in some cases for twenty years.

The Cultural Revolution was officially being described as an irredeemably black moment in recent China's history, but it was also one that dissident Wei Jingsheng, following the Li Yizhe analysis, would proclaim a hijacked people's revolution. It had been proclaimed over in 1976, but its mood still intermingled with that of the phoney Peking Spring.

While one or two of the writers I had studied in the comfort of London's academic libraries were now publishing and making appearances again, a number of them would not be "rehabilitated" -- that is given back their limited freedom to exist and write again -- until the early 1980s. But the majority of those who could take up their pens once more were soon proven to be out of touch with the new realities. Contented simply to be recognized once more, to have a salary and a place to live in the capital, it was not this older generation that would meet with the leaden hand of censorship and intolerance which would descend repeatedly through the 1980s each time recalling the Cultural Revolution whose methods had been officially renounced.

The writerly representatives of the intellectual class were the former, now disappointed, Red Guards from whose eyes the scales of Maoist utopianism had been shed during their years of enforced re-education in the harsh material conditions of China's countryside. For after Mao had regained and consolidated his grip on power, around 1968, the unruly yet faithful urban youngsters upon whom he had called to overturn the bureaucratic order were dispatched to far-flung corners of China's still desperately backward countryside where they were meant to learn from the peasants. A number of such youngsters had started to write the short poems which were far removed from

the eulogizing efforts of official writers. In 1979 and 1980, I would come to know their work through samizdat publications such as the 1978-1980 flagship literary magazine *Jintian – Today*.

That was the beginning of my decade in China. Its end straddled and encompassed that instant when, in the dark, pre-dawn hours of a May morning in 1990, I rode in a friend's car – still a rare possession for a citizen of Beijing at that time – down the deserted avenue dividing the Gate of Heavenly Peace from the Square of the same name and felt the vibrations of the tyres against the bumpy, bevelled surface left by the passage of the tanks 11 months before.

It is this era, bracketed by these milestones, that this book will attempt to recount.



## EPILOGUE

### PURSUIT AND FLIGHT

What of the fate of the writers and intellectuals who had intervened in the political developments of 1989?

The literary and cultural critic, Liu Zaifu had attempted to negotiate with the regime on behalf of the students in mid-1989 and had argued with State Education Commissioner Li Tieying, a close ally of Li Peng, about the government's intransigence over the student hunger-strikers.<sup>10</sup> For having done so he was accused of being a prime instigator of the "counter-revolutionary rebellion" and labelled a "black hand". In 1989, he took up residence first in Chicago and later moved to Colorado.

Wang Peigong, the playwright who had scripted the banned play *WM* in 1985, was arrested after having publicly "renounced his membership in the Communist Party to show support for the democracy movement." He too was accused of "inciting counter-

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<sup>10</sup> Su Xiaokang in conversation with Cheng Yingxiang, Cheng Yingxiang, pp. 468-469.

revolutionary activities" and "harbouring criminals wanted by the State." He spent almost two years in prison.<sup>11</sup>

Jin Guantao, who had been closely associated with the River Elegy documentary, left China for Hong Kong just before the events of the spring 1989. He was accused by the Chinese government after 4 June of being one of the "black hands" responsible for inciting the students to "rebellion." He remained in the British colony attached to the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Su Xiaokang, who, together with Jin Guantao and Wang Luxiang, had been responsible for the television documentary River Elegy, had sensed that the repression was imminent in mid-May and left the country before 4 June, establishing himself in the USA. His television series was held responsible by the Chinese government for its alleged part in inciting the protests of 1989.

Liu Binyan who had left China in 1987, having been expelled from the Chinese Communist Party and targeted by the Campaign Against Bourgeois Liberalization, was in the USA during the spring of

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<sup>11</sup> As reported by the international writers organisation, PEN, in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 13, 17 August 1989. Wang subsequently worked as a television- and film-script writer, notably collaborating with Chen Kaige on the script of historical drama film *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1998).

1989, and would see out his days there; he died in exile in 2007.

Duoduo, after the immediate Western media agitation that surrounded him in the wake of June 1989 had subsided, would spend the next decade and a half in exile in Canada and Holland. After more than fifteen years of exile during which his reputation with young poets and readers in China continued to grow, Duoduo now travelling on a Dutch passport would be permitted to take up a post as a visiting professor of poetry on the southern Chinese offshore island of Hainan where an illustrious predecessor had been the twelfth-century exiled poet-mandarin Su Dongbo 苏东波.

Cui Jian, the Chinese rock singer, who had sung in support of the students at Tiananmen Square, was barred from performing in public. He offered to do a series of nationwide concerts in 1990 and to donate the proceeds to the funding of Asian Games which were due to take place in Beijing in 1990, and which were now seriously financially compromised by the international repugnance towards the Chinese authorities in the wake of 4 June. Cui Jian's initial performances were so popular that the government

took fright and cut short the concert tour.<sup>12</sup>

## *TODAY* in STOCKHOLM

Mang Ke, one of the original co-editors of *Today*, and signatory of the "33-name petition" had stayed in China where I visited him in Beijing at the beginning of May 1990. He was living in his small Beijing flat surrounded by dozens of cartons of his already printed but undistributed books of a 1989 edition of his poems, books he had managed to salvage before they were pulped.

A week later, having been tailed and subjected to a "friendly" interrogation in Shanghai, and having passed through Hong Kong to speak to those who had provided "the tunnel" through which dissident writers and others had escaped their post-4 June pursuers, I arrived in Stockholm for the meeting of exiled writers whose ambition was to revive the *Today* magazine.

Stockholm, May 1990, was a sort of terminus. While still in a state of shock following the previous year's events, writers and intellectuals who had sought, or who had found themselves, in exile, were nevertheless

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<sup>12</sup> *China Rocks: The Long March of Cui Jian*, "Rhythms of the World, Penumbra, BBC 2, transmitted 16 February 1991. See also "Cui Jian's Long March: A rock star in China," by Stephen Hallett, associate producer of the documentary *China Rocks*, in *China Now*, No. 136 (1991), pp 10-12.

having to come to terms with the post-Tiananmen situation.

The ambition of the gathering in Stockholm in the month of May 1990 was to re-launch the literary journal *Jintian-Today*. Those who had participated in the original samizdat "non-official" literary magazine of the late 1970s Peking Spring, and who were present in Stockholm included co-editors Bei Dao and Chen Maiping (Wan Zhi).

Bei Dao had left China for a conference in the United States on 23 April 1989. After 4 June his presence in China was declared undesirable; he was constrained to live abroad. Chen Maiping, who was already resident in Scandinavia organized the practicalities of the rebirth of *Today*.



Chen Maiping, Stockholm, May 1990

The young writer Xu Xing was relieved to have

found a safe haven yet seemed traumatized by his escape from China, while Liu Suola spoke of and sang her passion, for music. Yang Lian the poet, and Li Tuo, the literary editor and critic, drank coffee, dissected the past and planned the future. Gao Xingjian had come from Paris to associate himself with the *Today* project.

The meeting in Stockholm was an emotionally-charged occasion where old friendships were renewed, new alliances forged, and where post-Tiananmen analyses, afterthoughts and recriminations were aired.<sup>13</sup>

The writers' meeting in Stockholm concluded with everyone agreeing to relaunch the *Today* magazine, and all present continued with their exile existence for extended stretches of time.

The May 1990 *Today* meeting also served as the focal point for peripheral events, public poetry readings and seminars arranged by local sinologists. During and around these events I was able to conduct

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<sup>13</sup> For the previous eleven months I had been preparing a major one-hour documentary for BBC national radio to be transmitted on 4 June 1990. The documentary's title, inspired by a phrase in a poem by Duoduo, was *The Urgent Knocking: New Chinese Writing and the Movement for Democracy*. The research, interviews, and writing of the programme had taken place in the UK, in Chicago - where several major figures such as Li Tuo and Liu Zaifu had taken refuge, in Hong Kong, in China, and finally in Stockholm.

and record a series of long discussions on a one-to-one basis with a number of the writers present in Stockholm.



Bei Dao, Chen Maiping, Zha Jianying, Gao Xingjian, restaurant owner, the author, Li Tuo. Stockholm, 13 May 1990.



Bei Dao, Li Tuo and Yang Lian,  
Stockholm 11 May 1990



Liu Suola, Xu Xing, Gao Xingjian,  
Stockholm, 11 May 1990

The questions I put to Gao Xingjian did not therefore address directly the question of the Nobel Prize but rather the condition of the exiled writer and possibilities for a Chinese exile literature to develop. Critical of the Chinese government's manipulation of patriotism and its instrumentalization of creative practices, Gao had already taken up residence in Europe in 1987, the year of the Campaign Against Bourgeois Liberalization....

On 12 May 1990, having heard the news I had brought from Beijing that all attempts to get an exit visa for his wife and child had failed, Bei Dao nevertheless dutifully declaimed his Chinese poetry to an attentive Swedish public for whom it had never been intended. Listening to Bei Dao's poetry in this Nordic city so distant in space and spirit from the Beijing of the 1980s, it was for me a moment of realization: the time of the Chinese intellectual's



political engagement was over, the time of the exiled poet had commenced. It was the end of an era.<sup>14</sup>



Bei Dao, Stockholm  
12 May 1990

Not the living but the dead  
under the doomsday-purple sky

...

at the end of hatred is hatred

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<sup>14</sup>Bei Dao is still considered undesirable by the Chinese authorities, but after many years spent in the United States, in 2008, he was provisionally allowed to take up a professorship at the Chinese University in the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong.

the spring has run dry, the conflagration  
stretches unbroken  
the road back is even further away  
Bei Dao\*

## FORGETTING HISTORY

*...about once each decade,  
the true face of history is  
thoroughly erased from the  
memory of Chinese society.  
This is the objective of the  
Chinese Communist policy  
of "Forgetting History". In  
an effort to coerce all of  
society into a continuing  
forgetfulness, the policy  
requires that any detail of  
history that is not in the  
interests of the Chinese  
Communists cannot be  
expressed in any speech,  
book, document or other  
medium.*

Fang Lizhi<sup>\$</sup>

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\* Bei Dao, "Requiem - for the victims of June Fourth," translated by Bonnie S. McDougall and Chen Maiping. *New Directions: An International Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, 54 (1990), pp. 4-5.

The first anniversary of "Tiananmen" came and went without incident on mainland China. Security, as might be expected, had been reinforced for some time and especially so in May and June. Fang Lizhi and his wife were still living inside the American embassy compound. And then after a year's negotiations, on 25 June the Chinese authorities announced in a face-saving statement that given Fang's willingness to "repent" and in view of the couple's state of health it had been decided to grant them "clemency" and accede to their demand to leave the country. Fang and Li Shuxian left their sanctuary and flew out of China that evening on a United States military plane. The Americans were relieved of an embarrassing situation, China's supreme leader was rid of his most loathed enemy, and a chapter in China's modern history came to an end.

The story of the succeeding decades is that of a period marked by what Fang dubbed "forgetting history" during which time the authorities have almost succeeded in erasing the memory of June 1989. The erasure of memory has in part been accomplished by

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§ Fang Lizhi, "Lishi jiang bu zai bei yiwang" 历史将不再被遗忘 [History will not be forgotten yet again] unpublished, 1990. Published in English as "The Chinese Amnesia" (translation by Perry Link) in *The New York Review of Books*, 27 September 1990, pp. 30-31; and in Fang Lizhi, *Bringing Down the Great Wall: Writings on Science, Culture, and Democracy in China*, New York: Knopf, 1991 p. 267-275.

the boom in consumer capitalism, in part by deftly courting academics and intellectuals who now benefit from better material conditions than ever before. The authorities have also allowed to return many of those connected with the 1980s pro-democracy movement, while continuing to refuse entry to those exiles they consider most dangerous.

Wei Jingsheng, the man whose release both Bei Dao's and Fang Lizhi's open letters had demanded in 1989, was not released from gaol until 14 September 1993, and then only for him to be re-arrested on April Fool's Day 1994. In November 1995 he was condemned again, this time for "attempting to overthrow the government," and given a fourteen-year prison sentence. Two years later he was freed on "health grounds" and expelled from China. Arrests of current dissidents continue.

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On 8 October 1990 China's first MacDonald's fast-food restaurant opened in the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen.<sup>15</sup> In the spring of 1992 Deng Xiaoping

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<sup>15</sup>Wu Xiaobo 吴晓波, *Jidang sanshinian:Zhongguo qiye 1978-2008 (shang)* 激荡三十年:中国企业 1978—2008 (上). Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe 中信出版社 China CITIC Press, 2007, p. 248.

embarked on his "Southern tour" of China visiting Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shanghai to support and relaunch his faltered market capitalist reforms. By the end of the 1990s, the nascent materialism of the 1980s had entirely engulfed China's urban population, a new bourgeoisie had emerged, and with it a social fracture, class divisions, and industrial unrest on a daily basis. The economic crisis of 2008-2009 merely served to exacerbate the divide between the haves and the have-nots.

The democracy that many imagined would naturally accompany the economic reforms has, as is the case in much of the post-1989 world, still not come, Mao's portrait still hangs over Tiananmen, and the Communist Party reigns supreme.

But the Lost Decade happened, as did its tragic conclusion in June 1989. Despite the official policy of "Forgetting History" witnesses still abound. One of them, who stood behind Zhao Ziyang during his encounter with the hunger-striking students at Tiananmen Square shortly before the final debacle, is now China's Prime Minister.

*[M]ost people willingly deceive  
themselves with a doubly blind*

*faith; they believe in eternal  
memory (of men, things, deeds,  
peoples) and in rectification (of  
deeds, errors, sins, injustice).  
Both are a sham. The truth lies  
at the opposite end of the scale;  
everything will be forgotten and  
nothing will be rectified. All  
rectification (both vengeance  
and forgiveness) will be taken  
over by oblivion. No one will  
rectify wrongs; all wrongs will  
be forgotten.  
Milan Kundera\**

*I don't believe death has no retribution*  
Bei Dao<sup>§</sup>

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\* Ludvik in Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (translated from the Czech [Žert, 1967] by Henry Heim), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, p. 245.

§ 我不相信死无报应. Bei Dao 北岛, 'Huida' 回答 (The answer) in *Jieju huo kaishi*, 结局或开始, Wuhan: Changjiang wenyichubanshe 长江文艺出版社, 2008, p. 7.